

## Coda: A wicked problems mindset for educational development

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*The state of emergency is always also a state of emergence.*

—Claudia Rankine, *Citizen: An American Lyric*

This brief piece has two purposes: to reflect on the argument in “What’s the Problem Now?” (Bass, 2020) in light of the events of the past two years and to give that essay’s core argument—that the problem of learning in higher education is a wicked problem—a more practical grounding for how it can shape the work of educational developers going forward. For the latter especially, the argument builds off of the outstanding articles that have been selected for this issue, which provide a set of both pragmatic and visionary responses for the role of educational developers in supporting the next phase of transformation made possible by the changes undergone in the pandemic adaptation.

### Prologue to the Pandemic

Written in the fall of 2019, “What’s the Problem Now?” opens with a reflection on the complicated relationship among tragedy and trauma, teaching and learning, and the mediating role of educational developers. I focused on the tragic 2018 Pittsburgh synagogue shooting and the sensitive and professional responses by a center for teaching and learning in the neighborhood of the shooting in the immediate

aftermath. Their trauma-informed response was both poignant and “eerily normalized,” as educational developers were becoming used to such responses to traumas as integral to their work. With this idea, I wanted to point out the “asymmetry” between the challenges of a world in which trauma and tragedy are increasingly present and the ways centers for teaching and learning (CTLs) and educational developers consequently need to accept this as their mission to help teachers and students cope.

“What’s the Problem Now?” was long in press production by the time the events of 2020 started unfolding—the global pandemic, the pivot to remote instruction, a racial reckoning across the United States, and the dynamics and polarization of the presidential election. Consequently, the “asymmetry” between the inside and outside of the classroom was amplified many times over. For example, in an interview in the summer of 2020, as part of a Georgetown-based sensemaking project, Robin DeRosa put it this way:

Most of what has really been hardest about all of the events of the last few months have been things that we’ve been struggling with in Higher Ed and just particularly nationally in the U.S. for a long, long time. So, I guess what I’m feeling is that the intersection of COVID with some of the call outs from the Black Lives Matter protests is really showing us how precarious Higher Ed has been and how vulnerable so many folks in the system have been. It shows us how culpable Higher Ed has been in not only not fixing some of the challenges that we are facing, but actually exacerbating them. I think it’s been a wake-up call for some folks. But for other folks, it’s just been a long overdue reckoning. (Higher Education’s Big Rethink, 2020)

This reckoning with a flawed and fragile social system in a tumultuous, emotional time period added a complicated layer to the work educational developers faced in just doing their job to support the online pivot. In supporting the pivot, educational developers played a full

range of roles, amplifying and adapting the functions they often play as “hub, incubator, temple and sieve” (POD Network, 2019), but were also asked to stretch inventively into new work and partnerships. With the unfolding of each looming semester, educational developers took on supporting the attendant uncertainties of returns and openings—virtual and hybrid—and the rampant and previously largely hidden inequities in the most basic instructional practices and contexts for learning.

The adaptation to the pandemic, with regard to remote instruction, demonstrated that the capacities of educational developers were more than up to the task. By a few months into the 2020 crisis, educational developers had been appreciated, elevated, and exhausted. Educational developers deployed a wide range of intellectual tools and professional practices, including (to name only a few) evidence-based pedagogies, pedagogies of care, community building, cohort-based professional learning, technical support, instructional design and assessment, and impact evaluation. Educational developers proved themselves to be mission critical, acting as responsive support, problem-solvers, and pedagogical “influencers,” often reaching high-water marks of impact and reach (Bessette & McGowan, 2020; Carter et al., 2021; Grupp & Little, 2019; Korsnack & Ortquist-Ahrens, 2021).

Out of this focus on the needs of the moment, a new set of “openings” were emerging:

An opening for listening to student voices in new ways; an opening for sustaining momentum around faculty openness to evidence-based pedagogies and the role of sustained professional learning; an opening for increasing the flexibility through virtual learning for institutions where online learning was less available or segmented from “traditional” learning formats; and an opening for new connections across silos, loosening barriers between academic and student affairs, faculty and academic staff, advising and other holistic student supports. (Higher Education’s Big Rethink, 2020)

These are the kinds of openings implied by the frequently articulated questions of “what might be retained or remembered” out of the pandemic adaptation. Yet each of these (and more like them) can have either incremental or transformational impact, depending on how seriously they are pursued. If higher education institutions are positioned to act meaningfully and strategically on these openings, then educational developers will be at the center.

Yet, the events of 2020 produced a surplus of meaning—and trauma—that far exceeded the implications for future forms of virtual and hybrid instruction. This set of openings is more far reaching, complicated, and runs to the core of culture, structures, identity, and purposes. These include an opening for understanding trauma as pervasive, collective, and systemic; an opening for understanding the ways that higher education perpetuates inequality even as it seeks to advance social mobility; an opening for revisiting the mission and aims of education in the context of new financial constraints, continued decline of public funding, changing demographics, and the inevitable crises that will come; and an opening for understanding the ways that higher education institutions, too often relying on “a narrow, raceless set of variables” (Harper et al., 2018), create forms of harm and perpetuate systemic racism even as they seek to improve diversity, raise consciousness, and create expanded contexts for belonging.

These openings create an increasingly complex and porous boundary between the world inside and outside of the classroom. Yet, we are only beginning to fully grapple with the ways that educational developers will be asked to help institutions navigate this emerging terrain. How well are educational developers positioned and equipped to support institutions to take on these challenges and do so in social and cultural contexts where long-standing inequities are deepened by increasing polarization and chronic uncertainty? These questions speak to the asymmetry between the classroom and the world and serve as a thin slice for the ways that the problem of learning in higher education is a wicked problem.

## A Wicked Problems Mindset for What Comes Next

There is always danger in focusing on wicked problems in that it can lead one to paralysis or a sense of futility. The complexity of wicked problems can seem overwhelming, outsize any sense of impact that any one person or group can have on any piece of the problem. Yet, a wicked problems *mindset*, as I'm calling it here, is intended to imply a stance that uses a recognition of the full complexity of the problem to reframe how individual and collective agents of change think about their work (Ellis, 2018). A wicked problems mindset provides an important context for conceptualizing the next phase of higher education's evolution. And I would go further to assert that without something like a wicked problems mindset (by whatever name), higher education will be far less likely to transfer the organizational learning from the pandemic into progress on any of these openings toward institutional change.

How does this speak to the implications of a wicked problems mindset for the work of educational developers? In the simplest of terms, a wicked problems mindset implies three stances: *take the wide view*, building increasingly diverse coalitions, amplifying increasingly diverse voices, and taking in the widest range of disciplinary and interdisciplinary perspectives; *take the long view*, asking how the work we do in the next couple of years might shape the next 10 (and more); *take the critical view*, finding ways to support and advance the known best practices while also being a source of professional and institutional self-reflection and creative disruption, continuously questioning where and how learning takes place, as well as the helpful and harmful ways that higher education institutions embody the aims of education. It is not, of course, on the shoulders of educational developers alone to effect this transformation. Yet, educational developers have never been positioned better to shape institutional responses (acknowledging how stretched and burned-out many are feeling at the moment) (Chen et al., 2022; Hatfield et al., 2022). Let me turn briefly then to how each of these three stances might translate into the wicked problems

mindset that our set of openings demands and for which educational developers might continue to deepen the essential qualities of their professional roles and identities.

## **The Wide View**

Taking the wide view serves to expand the role of educational developers as hubs and connectors, as they help to engage key challenges by organizing multi-disciplinary, multi-vocal, and multi-stakeholder approaches. In order to play a pivotal role in extending the potential of higher education, educational developers will need to build on their successes and credibility to extend their own sense of value and scope. This opportunity depends on recognizing the relative “locus of influence” that each educational developer has. The articles in this volume make this clear by offering a spectrum of responses to a wicked problems mindset, from leveraging the “contexts of agency” related to professional “identity, institution, and impact” (Landy et al., 2022) to the ethos (“wicked consciousness”) that educational developers bring to new collaborations and partnerships (Smith et al., 2022; see also Chen et al., 2022; Dietz et al., 2022; Hatfield et al., 2022; McCreary, 2022; Wise et al., 2022).

A wide view, for example, may transform the ways a campus responds to the opening from the pandemic to adopt trauma-based approaches, ensuring that students, faculty, and staff can both cope and recover (Imad, 2021). In the near term, this poses significant demands for the adoption of an ethic of care and continued adaptation of certain instructional approaches, but it underestimates the impact of trauma if understood narrowly, or even pathologically. We are learning more all the time about the ways that trauma is both pervasive and structural, individual and collective. Attention to trauma is related to many forms of well-being, culturally inclusive pedagogies, and a broad set of systemic and environmental conditions. This growing awareness of trauma is also giving rise to various forms of backlash

and critiques of “trauma fatigue” and “trauma creep” as signs of this generation’s lack of resilience. Or, worse, it gives rise to assertions that attention to trauma and intergenerational cycles are only feeding the “woke consciousness” that is destroying education (Bennett, 2022; Gutmann & Rossi, 2022). This is precarious and wicked terrain that implicates stakeholders and knowledge across many separate domains of colleges and universities. Who is better equipped to provide the intellectual resources and professional agility for navigating the complexity of trauma-informed educational practice than educational developers?

This same need applies across the whole spectrum of demands for improving the quality of teaching and learning that builds on the openings that adaptations of pandemic pedagogies revealed. To do so will mean drawing on “processes that are already working to improve the Academy” (Wise et al., 2022), which include strategies such as the Departmental Action Team (DAT) project that weaves together high-functioning collaborative teams of faculty (of all kinds), students (of all kinds), and key academic staff (Wise et al., 2022). A wide view aligns here with the evidence-based literature in showing that for professional learning to have real impact it must be both “systemic and co-constructed” with a wide range of stakeholders (Eynon et al., 2022). Collaboratively constructed professional and organizational learning “within an agile, systems-based approach to institutional change” has the potential to create the “continuous improvement model needed to ensure that higher education can advance equity-focused change and meet its pressing challenges” (Eynon et al., 2022).

This implies a new wicked consciousness that positions educational developers to rethink relationships and partnerships and new forms of collaboration within and outside the institution (Grupp & Little, 2019; Smith et al., 2022). In the near future, even the core mission of advancing quality teaching and learning will necessitate more than just the application of evidence-based pedagogies to current classrooms. For example, what role will educational developers play in “sociotechnical” approaches to “human-centered analytics” that will inevitably

continue to shape higher education (Selwyn, 2019; Shum et al., 2019) or in new combinations of virtual and place-based learning or in the changing nature and modalities of “presence” in the years ahead (Turner, 2022)? The next decade will give educational developers the opportunity to bridge teaching and learning strategies with the most important influences shaping our world.

## **The Long View**

The call to “the moral duty of educational developers . . . to leverage their power to cultivate a more just society” (Landy et al., 2022) is what links day-to-day practice to a wicked problems mindset. This call spans from inclusive and collaborative “slow change” strategies such as DATs (Wise et al., 2022) to emerging, long-term, and uncertain work such as responding to systemic and racial injustice (Dietz et al., 2022). Nothing will speak more to the long view, or be more urgent and wicked coming out of the 2020–2022 period in higher education, than the need to focus on racially just and culturally inclusive pedagogies. And nothing more epitomizes the porosity between classroom and the world at the center of a wicked problems mindset than the pursuit of anti-racism and systemic justice through an expansive diversity, equity, inclusion, and justice (DEIJ) agenda. In the words of Kyoko Kishimoto (2018):

Anti-racist pedagogy is not about simply incorporating racial content into courses, curriculum, and discipline. It is also about how one teaches, even in courses where race is not the subject matter. It begins with the faculty’s awareness and self-reflection of their social position and leads to the application of this analysis not just in their teaching, but also in their discipline, research, and departmental, university, and community work. In other words, anti-racist pedagogy is an organizing effort for institutional and social change that is much broader than teaching in the classroom. (p. 540)

Educational developers are uniquely positioned to mediate the diverse forms of theory and emerging practice that are needed to reshape teaching culture around anti-racism and culturally inclusive pedagogies. Moreover, they constitute the kind of educational change that goes far beyond the translation of technique or application of best practice. In order to advance culturally responsive pedagogies and anti-racism in the curriculum, educational developers become “DEI cultural influencers” (Dietz et al., 2022), facilitators of intentional and reflective processes.

If learning is indeed wicked, then this repositions our expertise and what we have to offer to faculty, students, and programs. . . . Rather than serving as a fount of knowledge, we become the hub through which open, persistent inquiry and critical reflection into teaching and learning occurs. . . . In other words, we may not be able to solve diversity, equity, and inclusion challenges, but we can, hopefully, get people to think more deeply about them. (Dietz et al., 2022)

In supporting this, educational developers can help “build new rooms” where those who have been historically marginalized have voice (Táiwò, 2020), beginning with students, who have been the primary drivers of anti-racist activism throughout the pandemic (Black Student Athlete Coalition, 2020; Cook-Sather et al., 2021; Nguyen, 2020).

The work of anti-racist pedagogy is “not a ready-made product” but “rather is a process” (Kishimoto, 2018) that will be shaped by time, complexity, and institutional context. It will require the systemic integration of pedagogical and curricular change with broader long-term institutional changes: hiring, recruiting, and retention practices; inclusive leadership; policy changes; and deeper culture and mindset changes. This is complicated, difficult, and long-term work, especially at historically White institutions, where racial and class biases are deeply embedded in many levels of practice and culture. In these complex contexts, higher education institutions need the expertise

and ethos of educational developers if they are to ever fully embrace the idea that systemic inequity in higher education (both race and class) is itself a wicked problem.

## **The Critical View**

One of the salient takeaways from higher education's extraordinary adaptation to the circumstances of the past two years is that we now know that the chronic undervaluing of quality teaching and inclusive learning is a matter of will not ability. We saw that when enrollment and financial stability were directly at stake, institutions will pay more attention and commit more resources to the quality of the learning experience. It begs the question then of what could be accomplished if the same intensity and commitments of the pandemic adaptation (driven by the continuity of tuition) were directed at the widespread adoption of culturally inclusive practices or the significant improvement in the quality of teaching and student learning to improve student success (Krause, 2012).

Until the pandemic adaptation, efforts at advancing evidence-based pedagogies for the improvement of teaching were often distinct from those aimed at improving culturally responsive pedagogies, equity, and inclusion. The events of the past two years have helped to make vivid that these are really entangled strands of the wicked problems of higher education. Whom we teach, how well we teach, for whom our institutions are designed, and whose "capital" we value (Yosso, 2005) are all complexly connected. In so many ways, educational developers are in a unique position to weave these questions together and to do so with the resilience, thoughtfulness, and creative influence that has been tested and validated in the last two years.

Yet, these entangled questions cannot be taken up as if they were "tame" problems that could be solved by the application of tools and

techniques. In this sense, educational developers' roles as "incubators and sieves" also imply bringing a critical stance to institutional conversations and strategies. Where do core practices do harm as well as good? How should educational developers continue to support trauma-informed practices, not just for this moment but in anticipation of new disruptions, political, social, cultural, and environmental? This includes taking a critical view of our own practices, stepping back to ask the most fundamental questions about our own practices, such as whether "backward design," with its "problems-centered" and "outcomes-centered" approach, is inhibiting effectiveness to help faculty and students cope with uncertainty and trauma (McCreary, 2022). Or, such as with the approaches that I have been advocating, what kind of creatively disruptive strategies, or expansive professional identities, support positive transformation or perpetuate unequal practices and risk eroding core values?

## **Hope and Risk**

A wicked problems mindset requires a critical stance toward the "institution" and ourselves. It also requires both a sense of hope and a willingness to take risks. With this thought, I'll close with a passage from Gert Biesta: "To engage in learning always entails the risk that learning might have an impact on you, that learning might change you. This means that education only begins when the learner is willing to take a risk" (Biesta, 2006, p. 25). We might also say that "education only begins" when the educator or the institution is similarly "willing to take a risk." Such risk-taking has to be inseparable from hope, of course (McGowan & Felten, 2021). Hope and risk are at the heart of a wicked problems mindset. The last two years more than demonstrated the capacity of educational developers to help higher education navigate crises. Now is the time to expand the strategies and tools for helping higher education navigate a wicked future.

## Biography

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